

Conservancy drafts sweeping plan for Sierra

Written by [Ashley Archibald, The Union Democrat](#) March 25, 2010 12:04 pm

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is proposing a broad-based policy aimed at promoting sustainable development and bringing jobs to the Sierra Nevada.

The policy, called the Sustainable Sierra Nevada Initiative, outlines general goals including protecting water, creating jobs, reducing pollutants emitted by catastrophic fires, providing habitats for threatened and endangered species and maximizing carbon entrapment by area forests.

To do so, it proposes coordination between federal, state and local agencies to identify policies and investment opportunities for public and private resources for both water quality and the use of sustainable wood products and biomass energy.

Biomass is organic material that can be burned to produce energy. The wording is broad enough that people from both environmental and industry groups — often at odds — can come together at the same table, said Jim Branham, the conservancy's executive officer.

The trick is focusing on something that benefits both environmental activists and industry representatives — healthy forests that are at smaller risk of catastrophic fire. "The solutions are really not that different," Branham said.

Both sides have to focus on the 90 percent of the issues that they agree on, rather than on the 10 percent on which they butt heads, Branham said. Businesses are also included in the outreach, and in the proposed initiative. According to Larry Duysen, a forester with Sierra Forest Products, a sawmill in Terra Bella, outside of Porterville, the company's interaction with SNC has been helpful.

"One of their mandates is to preserve rural communities and manage forests," Duysen said. "Any way they can support existing (sawmills) or influence new industries to come in, it's a plus-plus for the forest."

Part of the conservancy's plan to prevent catastrophic fire is fuel reduction, which can benefit all-size, all-wood type sawmills like Sierra Forest Products, which turns the excessive biomass that fuel fires into commercial products.

Similar industries exist in Tuolumne County, including a new business that uses small trees to make wood chippings sold as livestock bedding, Branham said.

The initiative is open to a public comment process until May 1. It will then be considered at the conservancy's board meeting in June. If it is accepted, local groups, such as county boards of supervisors, will be asked to support it.

The conservancy, created by state legislation, focuses its efforts on 22 counties across 25 million acres of California, from the Oregon border to Kern County, said Kim Carr, the conservancy's Mount Whitney-area manager.

Although it has in the past distributed grant funds for water-related projects in the area, state budget constraints forced a freeze on its grant funding. SNC had been funded to the tune of \$50 million for grants alone, and allocated \$30 million of that before its budget was frozen.

Approximately \$500,000 was sent to Tuolumne County for three projects, \$350,000 of which was used to study the Tuolumne Utility District's ditch system.

Though the group no longer has monetary incentives to coax parties to the table, it has served as a non-partisan arbitrator on contentious environmental issues, Branham said.

"I compare it to religion," Branham said. "Sometimes they hold to their opinion like a religious belief."

The conservancy meets both as a regional body, with representatives coming from various subregions, and also coordinates smaller meetings between local interests.

Tuolumne County Supervisor Paolo Maffei is the representative for the Amador, Mariposa, Tuolumne and Calaveras subregion to the conservancy. He recently replaced Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Willensky in the rotating seat.

As the sub-region representative, Maffei is the face of all four counties, each with complicated relationships between industry and conservation. Supervisors from the four counties met to discuss a united policy statement for Maffei to present at the March conservancy meeting in Anderson in Shasta County. Despite a range of viewpoints — ranching and conservationist policies included — the four managed to reach a consensus.

"We agreed completely on a policy document that Kim Carr drafted, which was a very similar policy document to the one presented at conference in Anderson from different sub-groups," Maffei said. "We were all saying somewhat the same thing."